

Cotton's 'six of the best' for 2002

By James Holden

I'm fast running out of adjectives. As a journalist that's a bit like a car running out of petrol, but after three years of reporting on the annual Cotton Grower of Year Awards, the tank of words describing excellence is just about empty. Each year I am amazed by the consistently high standard of growers nominated by their associations.

After a bit of head scratching (and with help from a thesaurus), I have exhumed a much misused, but entirely appropriate adjective that does justice to the finalists this year — 'superlative'.

The judges this year will no doubt agree all six growers had superlative farms — meaning they were all of the very highest degree — and in virtually all parts of their operations.

Bruce Finney, (southern operations manager for Twynam and chair of ACGRA), Phil Kelly (cotton marketing manager for Wesfarmers Landmark and accredited BMP auditor) and Rob Eveleigh (CSD extension and development agronomist) kindly gave up their time to make the hard decisions and come up with the winners of the 2002 awards.

Although innovation was plentiful again, there are two notable features of most of this year's entries. First, BMP has not only been embraced wholeheartedly, but has been taken well past the initial audit, even to certification level on some farms. Second, adoption of IPM principles, major tree-planting programs and establishment of on-farm wildlife refuges are examples of a high level of environmental awareness and responsibility.

This year there were four farms in the 'Cotton Grower of the Year, under 600 hectares' category, including one dryland farm. There were two finalists for the 'Cotton Grower of the Year, over 600 hectares' award.

The winners of these two awards competed for

The judges



Bruce Finney.



Rob Eveleigh.



Phil Kelly.

the major award — '2002 Cotton Grower of the Year'.

As in previous years, Cotton Australia sponsored the 'Cotton Australia Encouragement Award' presented to an innovative grower with an obvious potential to make a contribution to cotton farm management in the future.

Thanks go to the commercial sponsors of the 2002 Cotton Grower of the Year Awards — AgriRisk, Aventis and Incitec Fertilizers. Without them the awards would not be possible.

Wayne Reeves, Parker Joint Venture, Emerald

Consultant: Amanda Noone

WINNER: 2002 Australian Cotton Grower of the Year award as well as the under 600 hectares category

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Ian Thomas, St George

Consultant: Jamie Street

Ian is no stranger to these awards — last year he won Cotton Grower of the Year in the small farm category for his forward-thinking farm practices and industry leadership in the St George district.

One year later, none of that has changed. In fact Ian has further improved his farm by constructing three water storages that allow him to recycle 100 per cent of the tailwater on his three properties. This upgrade in his irrigation system immediately improved his water use efficiency, which was 1.7 bales per megalitre last season.

Ian has also completed more work on his extensive tree-planting program and is very protective of his established trees — especially around the time of defoliation!

With his consultant Jamie Street, Ian has led from the front with the local area wide management group. Last summer the group was so successful the rest of the district followed its IPM strategy for the entire season.

Ian's past involvement with ACGRA is well known. Ian's wife Jill maintains the family's involvement as a current ACGRA representative.



From left: Ross and Ken Skerman are firm believers in conservation farming.



Frank and Judy Maunder have completed a number of BMP initiatives.

Their son James is on the executive committee of the St George Cotton Growers Association.

The Skerman family, Darling Downs

Consultant: Murray Boshammer

The Skermans' dryland properties just west of Dalby are a great example of how a family farming enterprise should operate. The four farms are operated as one unit sharing machinery and labour, which is mostly sourced from within the family.

Each family member has their own clearly defined role and different expertise that compliments the entire operation.

By using the latest conservation farming techniques the Skermans make every last drop of soil water go as far as possible. There are also plenty of other innovative practices on the Skermans' farms especially in the areas of crop management, spraying and soil moisture monitoring.

Frank, Judy, Robert and Ruth Maunder, Upper Namoi

Consultant: Jack Murray

The Maunders' farm at Baan Baa in the Upper Namoi is in a floodway where no flood mitigation earthworks are allowed. So they have installed an underground system of pipes that allows them to transfer water to all parts of the farm, which is well known for its consistently high yields.

And because of close proximity to their neighbours, a river and a travelling stock route, the Maunders only spray with the farm's groundrig and have given an undertaking not to use endosulfan.

A number of BMP initiatives, including building a BMP-compliant chemical shed and planting trees on the farm, led to the Maunders completing their second audit last year.

John, Robyn and Andrew Watson, Upper Namoi

WINNER: Cotton grower of the Year (over 600 hectares)

Consultant: Rick Thomas



The Watsons have shown a major commitment to the cotton industry over the past 20 years (from left: John, Robyn and Andrew).



Lance Brown has made cotton an integral and vital part of Haddon Rig's diverse operation.

In 1980 John and Robyn Watson grew the first crop of cotton in the Upper Namoi on their farm Kilmarnock. It has been boots-and-all involvement in the cotton industry ever since. John has served on numerous committees including the Upper Namoi Cotton Growers Association, ACGRA, the BMP Management Committee and the Upper Namoi Water Users Association.

Robyn formed the first women's group in cotton and also served on the committee of the local growers' association. Her interest and involvement with Landcare is practically demonstrated by revegetating and stabilising the bank of the Namoi River on their property. She is now busy with similar projects on neighbours' farms.

The Watson's son Andrew returned to the farm in 2000 after working for Namoi Cotton and is also involved with the local growers' association. His knowledge of cotton quality issues is a great asset to the operation.

The Watsons' progressive thinking and long-term support of the industry has led to a vast amount of cotton research, including CSD variety trials, on Kilmarnock over the past 20 years.

On top of all this they run a leading-edge cotton farm that is BMP audited to the second level.

Lance Brown, Haddon Rig, Macquarie Valley

Consultant: Chris Ramsay

WINNER: 2002 Cotton Australia Encouragement Award

Haddon Rig may be better known in sheep-breeding than cotton-growing circles, but Lance Brown is about to change all that.

In less than a decade he has taken what was a small part of Haddon Rig's very diverse operation — which, apart from a sheep stud, includes wheat, canola, chickpeas and cattle — and has made cotton an integral and vital part of the enterprise.

He has done this with a combination of common-sense farming practices and innovation. On Haddon Rig's Braemar property Button grass was costing Haddon Rig many thousands of dollars from blocked drains and lint contamination. So

Lance 'installed' a biological filter of reeds to successfully remove button grass from irrigation water.

He also makes practical use of satellite imagery by ground-truthing what appear to be areas of low vigour.

Lance keeps a close eye on the environment by setting aside and maintaining a surge area for waterbirds and other wildlife. He has encouraged aquatic plants to establish in the surge area and says he has few problems with weeds spreading to other parts of the farm in irrigation water.

Lance maintains a soft-options buffer, and keeps vehicular access to an absolute minimum near the waterbird sanctuary.

Apparently canoeing on the storage is a very popular early morning activity for tourists visiting Haddon Rig on 'farmstay' holidays — another part of Haddon Rig's diversity.

Lance is actively involved with the Macquarie Cotton Growers Association and played an important part in developing the valley's Fusarium prevention policy.